

Longtime clerk going out with a smile

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By [Michelle McNiel](#)

World staff writer

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World photo/Mike Bonnicksen

Chelan County Clerk Siri Woods stands by bare filing cabinets where office paperwork used to be kept. Woods, who is retiring after 33-plus years, has seen the office go from using pens and paper, to typewriters, to electronic record-keeping.

WENATCHEE — When Siri Woods walks into the office and says “I was thinking about something last night,” her staff knows to look out.

“Everyone goes ‘Oh no, not again!’ ” Woods said, laughing.

During her 33 years as Chelan County clerk, Woods has introduced a whole lot of new ideas into the office, everything from comfortable chairs to the latest technology. She is credited with not only revolutionizing the court clerk’s job in the county but statewide.

And after more than three decades, she’s still enthusiastic about her job.

So it’s a good time to step down, she says.

“I’ll be 68 this summer,” she said in an interview earlier this month. “I still feel good. I’m having fun. I figure that’s a good way to go out.”

Woods will not be seeking a ninth term this fall. Instead, she will retire on Dec. 31 and plans to move to Olympia to be closer to her daughter.

She is the second-longest serving county clerk in the state’s history, and is third among all current elected county officials statewide.

“She’s worked really hard not only for Chelan County but our entire state,” said Debbie Wilke, executive director for the Washington Association of Counties, who has worked professionally with Woods since 1978. “She’s the only clerk who’s been elected clerk of the year twice because of her outstanding achievements. She’s really dedicated to the public and to county government.”

Woods was appointed clerk in May 1977 to fill a vacancy. At the time, Woods handled payroll, bookkeeping and other clerical work for the Mission Ridge Ski Area. She had no experience in law or court matters. But after being called to serve as a juror in nine jury trials in a three-month span, she threw her name into the mix — along with 26 other interested candidates.

She said no one should have to serve that often.

Woods said that when she was appointed, the Superior Court clerk's office had recorded every court action in big leather-bound books. Clerks had to go up and down the stairs all day to make copies in the Auditor's Office, which had the Courthouse's only copy machine at the time.

"Even though I saw things I didn't like, I made a promise that I wouldn't make any changes for the first year," she recalled.

Even the simplest changes were hard on the court staff. For instance, when she switched from having one receipt book to loose-leaf receipts for court fines, employees feared the paperwork would be lost.

But, one by one, she started overhauling things. She replaced the military-style green metal desks and uncomfortable metal chairs for her staff. She bought electric typewriters with correcting tape for all her clerks.

She bought a copy machine.

The office was crawling toward the technology age.

Then it was time to tackle the flawed jury system. She proposed and implemented a system where someone would only serve on a jury once in a year. She also instituted a call-in system, where people could call and listen to a recorded message to see if they would be needed, rather than having to come into the office.

Woods set up the message phone in her office, and said people in the court system fretted that no one would call and, as a result, there would be no one to serve on juries. But the fears were unfounded.

Her ideas for limiting jury service and having a call-in system were implemented statewide.

Woods said she has led the state in introducing new technology into the court system, mostly with ideas she picked up at national meetings and conventions. She has taken the office from all handwritten records — the clerk's office is charged with preserving all Superior Court records — to now all electronic documentation. She is in the process of giving away the office's rows of filing shelves, where paper records were once stored. Hers was the first clerk's office in the state to scan its documents.

One other accomplishment that Woods is particularly proud of is collecting court fines. She suggested that court clerks would be more effective at collecting fines than the state, which previously did it. The catch was that all counties in the state had to agree to it. She said she went on a statewide "dog and pony show" and was successful in getting all counties on board, and the state law was changed in 1996 to allow it.

"I always accuse Siri of never sleeping," Wilke said. "She's always calling me and saying 'Do you know what we should do?' She's constantly coming up with ideas for doing things differently."

Woods said "the fact that I can implement change" is the reason why she has stayed in the job so long,

"If you sat here and did the same thing every day for 30 years, I don't think I could have done it," she added.

Even as she prepares for retirement, Woods rattles off ideas for change that she would still like to still see happen. For one thing, she would like to see all uncontested divorces handled online, rather than in court. She also wants all courts in the state to have online records accessible to the public.

She doesn't plan to bow out of court issues completely. She said she will keep tabs on legislative hearings in Olympia and will continue to testify on issues that she is passionate about. She also plans to do more quilting, a hobby she has come to love.

"I've known her since 1978, and she's still traveling at the same speed she always has," Wilke said. "I don't know that she'll ever slow down."

Michelle McNiel: 664-7152

mcniel@wenatcheeworld.com